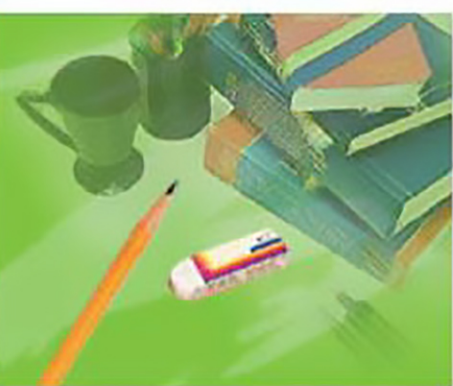
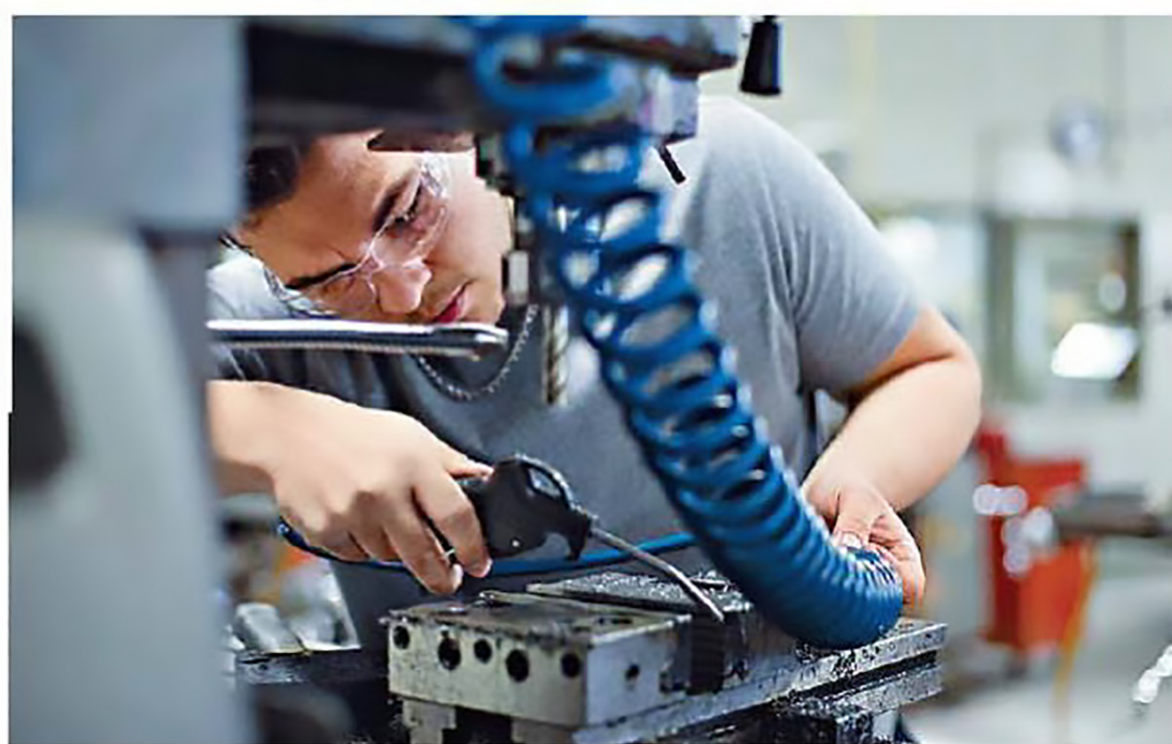


Education



Vocational training vs university degree



role as a manufacturing base. While many think the West chooses China for manufacturing because of low labor cost, the real reason is because of the type and quantity of technical skills located in one place (such as Shenzhen). Shenzhen is ground zero for this manufacturing prowess of China and that's one main reason why Apple has recently opened a research and development center there.

What about Hong Kong?

Culturally today, there is a strict pecking order to tertiary education, with universities clearly on top, with "meal ticket" majors attracting the most.

Socially, a degree from elite Western universities reigns supreme. This deep culture cannot be changed overnight.

Economically, Hong Kong has long lost its manufacturing base, and with it the need for highly skilled technical labor.

But that may change soon; with the development of the Greater Bay Area, and the completion of several major transportation projects, if one is willing to work within one to two hours' commuting distance from Hong Kong, the demand and opportunities for technically skilled workers should be abundant.

In Silicon Valley, many young workers choose to live in SF and commute to work in the "valley." Hong Kong can play the same role in the GBA.

If one is even bolder in making predictions, the development of such skilled labor pool may let Hong Kong compete in manufacturing industries in the new digital field, such as robotics, AI and biotech. It is an eco-system rather than "trickle down" economy – private sector and multi-nationals often choose regions to invest based on the availability of skilled talent pool.

Even the United States, which has long lost its traditional manufacturing industries to developing countries, especially in Asia, is trying to bring such industries back, under President Trump. If the United States can do it, why can't Hong Kong?

Out of the Box

Tony Chan Fan-cheong is president of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. He has spent his life pursuing his dreams relating to teaching and research, and has unique views on education, scientific and technological development, and nurturing the young.



Hong Kong has a strong vocational training system, with strong institutions.

I have visited the VTC's design, hospitality and culinary training units, and I can attest to the excellent infrastructure and the quality of training.

What is needed though is more exposure for what they do – in today's world, not every person needs an academic university education to advance in their lives, but the public seems to have forgotten this fact.

Our Chief Executive promises to increase promotional activities for vocational and professional education, but the implementation will be challenging, on both cultural and economic fronts.

She notes in her policy address: "Stakeholders in general still consider VPET inferior to traditional academic education. This bias is not conducive to the development of VPET and the relevant industries."

Some international comparison can provide appropriate perspective.

One is an article in the *Financial Times* last month headlined *Switzerland thrives on apprenticeship tradition*. Switzerland may be well known for its tourism and chocolates, but it is also a world leader in precision

machinery, high tech factory equipment, and also for big pharmaceutical companies.

Part of the reason is that Switzerland, and German speaking countries such as Germany and Austria, have a long tradition of apprenticeship, which has been the secret to their industrial competitiveness for centuries. Students entering high schools are divided into two streams; one would prepare them for universities, and another is the apprenticeship system, which pays a wage while the students are in training.

The private sector is highly involved in the apprenticeship system, in providing internships and suggestions for curriculum.

But most importantly, the system is culturally and socially accepted, and well respected. It attracts students with quality as good as those entering universities and companies are willing to invest in it as well.

The apprenticeship system provides highly skilled workers who can help translate more easily ideas and innovations into competitive commercial products for sale worldwide.

In a recent interview by *Fortune Magazine*, Apple's Tim Cook explained his view on China's